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Interim report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon

Introduction

1. By its resolution 1337 (2001) of 30 January 2001, the Security Council extended the mandate of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) for a further period of six months and decided to return its military personnel to the level of about 4,500 all ranks. The necessary measures have been taken to implement this reduction, which will be completed by 31 July 2001.

2. In paragraph 13 of the resolution, the Security Council endorsed the general approach for the reconfiguration of UNIFIL, as outlined in paragraph 23 of my report of 22 January 2001 (S/2001/66), and requested me to submit to it by 30 April 2001 a detailed report on the plans for the reconfiguration and on the tasks that could be carried out by the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO). This report is submitted pursuant to that request.

Recent developments

3. Since that resolution was adopted, the situation has remained essentially unchanged, although there were further developments in the dispute over the Shab'a farms area. As before, there were frequent minor ground violations of the Blue Line. There were, in addition, almost daily violations of the line by Israeli aircraft which penetrated deeply into Lebanese airspace. I have been in touch with the parties concerned and other interested parties to urge respect for the Blue Line and to avert further escalation.

4. Serious breaches occurred relating to the Shab'a farms dispute. On 16 February, Hizballah killed one Israeli soldier and wounded two others by means of a bomb placed in the Shab'a farms area, on the Israeli side of the Blue Line. The Israeli forces retaliated with heavy mortar and artillery fire into the vicinity of Kafr Shuba. On 14 April, Hizballah struck an Israeli tank with a missile approximately three kilometres from the Blue Line on the Israeli side, killing one Israeli soldier and wounding three others. The Israeli forces initially responded with heavy artillery fire into Lebanon, and on 16 April they carried out an air attack against a Syrian radar position about 45 kilometres east of Beirut. The Syrian authorities reported one soldier killed and four wounded. These incidents are a matter of serious concern as they have the potential to further exacerbate tension.

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5. Despite the Security Council's call in paragraph 7 of resolution 1337 (2001), Lebanon continues to assert that the Blue Line is not valid in the Shab'a farms area. With reference to paragraph 5 of resolution 1337 (2001), the presence of the Lebanese authorities in the south, including the armed forces, has remained basically the same as described in paragraph 7 of my last report.

Reconfiguration plan

6. In my last report, I noted that UNIFIL had essentially completed two of the three parts of its mandate, focusing now on the remaining task of restoring international peace and security. Pending a comprehensive p ce, UNIFIL seeks to maintain the ceasefire along the Blue Line through patrols, observation from fixed positions and close contact with the parties, the latter with a view to correcting violations and preventing escalation. Although these are the functions of an observer mission, I recommended that, in view of the conditions in the region, they be carried out by a combination of armed infantry and unarmed observers.

7. The focus of UNIFIL will be, as it is now, on the Blue Line and the adjacent area. In connection with the reconfiguration, it is envisaged that the area will be divided into two sectors. The bulk of the troops will be deployed in protected positions close to the Blue Line. There will be fewer fixed positions than at present to avoid too many personnel being absorbed by guard and maintenance duties. The Force will be present on the Blue Line primarily through its patrols. The Force headquarters will remain at Naqoura, protected by a separate guard, as at present. UNIFIL will continue to require full freedom of movement to meet its operational, administrative and logistic requirements.

8. The unarmed military observers of UNTSO will be entirely mobile and will no longer maintain static observation posts. This will enable them to undertake daytime patrolling, carry out investigations and perform liaison functions. The current strength of Observer Group Lebanon (51) is deemed sufficient for these tasks. For reasons of security and economy the observers will be accommodated alongside the infantry.

9. It is envisaged that the demining unit will be maintained, since mines will remain a serious hazard for the Force for the time being. In conformity with paragraph 10 of resolution 1337 (2001), UNIFIL has supported mine action activities related to assisting the efforts of the Government of Lebanon. My Personal Representative, Staffan de Mistura, has been very active generating support for mine clearing and ensuring effective coordination between the Lebanese authorities and United Nations agencies. An ad hoc high-level workshop on mine clearing will be held in Beirut on 21 May. The pledge by the Government of the United Arab Emirates to contribute $50 million towards demining activities in the south is greatly appreciated.

10. The other support elements will be reduced in accordance with the overall reduction. When the reconfiguration is complete, the Force will comprise troops from France (headquarters guard), Ghana (infantry), India (infantry), Italy (helicopters), Poland (logistics) and Ukraine (engineers/demining). Its overall strength would then be close to 2,000 all ranks.

Conclusion

11. It is envisaged that the reconfiguration of the Force will be achieved through the non-replacement or reduction of units on the occasion of their normal rotations. The Government of Ireland has already said that it will not replace its contingent when it rotates in October/November. The Finnish contingent will be reduced by 350 troops by the end of July, and it is my intention not to request a replacement for the remaining Finnish troops when they are repatriated in October. The departure of these two contingents will bring the strength of the Force to about 3,600. I recommend that the Force maintain that level until January 2002. Unless there is any drastic change in the region, the reconfiguration could be completed during the following mandate period, ending in July 2002.